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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MOSCOW 003262

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/03/2017
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [PREL](#) [RS](#)
SUBJECT: ROGOZIN ON "GREAT RUSSIA;" KOSOVO

REF: 06 MOSCOW 10227

Classified By: Political M/C Alice G. Wells: 1.4 (b, d).

¶1. (C) Summary: The charismatic and unscrupulous Dmitriy Rogozin is making another political bid to tap Russian nationalism with the attempted registration of a new political party, "Great Russia." Claiming to have siphoned off his previous Rodina supporters, dissatisfied with their merger into the Kremlin-sponsored opposition party "Just Russia," Rogozin points to high poll numbers, but concedes Kremlin opposition. While Rogozin may be angling to trade Great Russia ambitions for a Putin-bestowed foreign policy perch, his focus on Kosovo highlights the difficulties facing Putin as he seeks to push resolution of this issue beyond the March 2008 electoral calendar. End Summary

Rogozin Returns

¶2. (C) In a July 2 meeting, "Great Russia" leader Dmitriy Rogozin outlined his political aspiration to ride Russian nationalism and the rebirth of greater Russian chauvinism across the seven percent threshold into the State Duma, in the December 2007 elections. Rogozin, who previously headed the nationalist party "Rodina" (Homeland) before its absorption into the Kremlin-engineered "opposition" party "Just Russia" in October 2006, explained that his relative low-profile in the intervening period was in response to mounting government pressure against his supporters, as well as acts of violence against some party leaders. Rather than oppose Federation Council Chairman Mironov's ascendance within Just Russia, Rogozin acquiesced to being side-lined -- a fate that he linked to his exceeding the political expectations and desires of the Kremlin (reftel) in exploiting nationalist sentiment.

¶3. (C) Rogozin attributed his return to the political fray, with the June 25 filing of Federal Registration Service papers for the new political party "Great Russia" (Velikaya Rossiya), as a result of Mironov's broken agreements to accommodate Rodina party members in Just Russia electoral lists, the untapped political potential of the nationalist message, and the tug of personal ambition. According to Rogozin, Great Russia easily garnered the 50,000 membership requirement for registration through the defections of former Rodina members from Just Russia (and the wholesale defection of party branches in Rogozin's base of Voronezh, Smolensk, and Krasnoyarsk). Rogozin claimed that he was the most charismatic politician on an admittedly lackluster Russian political scene, and pointed to a privately commissioned poll in April by the respected All-Russian Center for the Study of Public Opinion that gave Great Russia 14 percent of the December electorate, before the party had launched a single advertisement or public meeting. Rogozin also identified polls that placed his popularity on levels exceeding First Deputy Prime Minister Medvedev and matching First Deputy Prime Minister Ivanov, Putin's putative candidates for

succession. (Note: In polls asking whom they will vote for president, generally only 2-4 percent of respondents select Rogozin.)

¶4. (C) Despite efforts by the administration to paint Great Russia as a xenophobic and fascist mob, Rogozin insisted that it represented a "palpable and potent" force, tapping into a "political" nationalism that trumpeted patriotism and inclusiveness over hatred. Pressed on anti-Semitic statements attributed to him in the press, Rogozin denied making them, argued that government-sponsored provocateurs had been expelled by Rogozin's followers from the April 2006 "Russian March," stressed that no signatories to the infamous anti-Semitic letter were among the party's leaders, noted his quick denunciation of the 2006 attack at a Moscow synagogue, and pointed to Jewish relatives as proof of his open-mindedness. (Note: Rogozin protests too much; among his party's followers are Yuriy Popov, Aleksandr Belov, and Andrey Savelev, whose anti-Semitism is well-known.)

Kremlin Bete Noire or Bargaining Chip?

¶5. (C) Rogozin denied that his latest political gambit had been coordinated with the Kremlin (in contrast to the formation of Rodina, which he has boasted privately and publicly was a Putin brainchild). Dismissing other opposition parties for their adherence to Kremlin ground rules, Rogozin argued that the influence of Kremlin Deputy Chief of Staff Vladislav Surkov was overestimated. While smart and talented, Surkov could not control the political tableau. It was one thing to block the registration of the Republican Party, headed by Vladimir Ryzhkov, which did not enjoy broad popular support; however, it would be difficult,

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Rogozin claimed, for the Kremlin to thwart Great Russia, given the swathe of the Russian populace that it represented. Rogozin insisted that his failure to secure a Kremlin (read: Presidential Chief of Staff Sobyannin) "guarantee" of Great Russia's registration did not imply that his new project was stillborn, but he conceded that he had no access to the GOR-dominated national television stations. Rogozin shared a recent conversation with Grigoriy Yavlinskiy, in which the liberal opposition leader allegedly joked that he could run, but not win, whereas Rogozin could win, but not run.

¶6. (C) However, Rogozin intimated that Great Russia could be a bargaining chip in future negotiations with Putin over Rogozin's political role. Rogozin expected to meet "soon" with Putin, and was prepared to discuss how he could assist the Kremlin on the foreign policy front, without being a handmaiden for the ruling party. Rogozin noted that he refrained from criticizing Putin personally, since he calculated that on core Rodina and now Great Russia interests, Putin was responsive: passing immigration reform; addressing the demographic crisis, and using the stabilization fund for national infrastructure projects. After bandying the electoral potential of Great Russia, Rogozin then questioned the point of serving in the Duma, which would remain subservient to the electoral branch, an institute weaker than the one he entered in 1997, and one in which he already had enjoyed a 10-year tenure, including as Chairman of the International Relations Committee.

Kosovo: Trump Card?

¶7. (C) Rogozin locked on Kosovo as a defining issue for his party and personal ambitions. Rejecting U.S. analysis of the Serb-Kosovo conflict as mistaken, Rogozin argued that the West underestimated Serbia's national humiliation. Russians shared these feelings of humiliation and empathized with the view that the Serbs were the "greatest victims" of Milosevic's policies. While Kosovo may be an ideological crutch, the Serbs should retain the territory until Belgrade

was "enticed" by a different future. Rogozin warned that there would be a "chasm" between the Russian people and Putin, in the event that the Russian government did not oppose the Ahtisaari plan. It would be equally inexplicable for the Russian government, in the context of Kosovo's independence, to deny the demands of Transnistrians to rejoin Russia, or to thwart Abkhazia's secession from Georgia. Rogozin stressed that the depth of domestic consensus on this issue had been obscured by Putin's strong support for Serbia. Should the Russian government waver, or the West take unilateral action, the public response would be quick and decisive.

Comment

18. (C) Rogozin remains a political wild card in a contrived political landscape. Smart, charismatic, and a political chameleon, he elicits grudging admiration from fellow politicians who admire his skills, while fearing his message.

Always reasonable in person, Rogozin has no compunction about using his bully pulpit to whip up nationalist sentiment. Because he frightens the Kremlin, our contacts tell us that Rogozin and his Great Russia are likely to remain under political wraps, but Kosovo remains the issue that could change the contours of political debate in this election year and a reminder of why the Russian leadership wants to push resolution of the conflict beyond the March 2008 electoral calendar.

RUSSELL